

Coffee - the Bean and the People

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Bean Facts...

☕ In terms of world commodity trading, coffee is #2, second only to oil. Worldwide production last year (2006) was more than 12 billion pounds. But while oil is pumped by a very small skilled workforce, coffee is primarily harvested by human hands.



Unroasted "green" coffee beans (pale green or light gray)

☕ Coffee is the most complex food or drink item on the planet, with at least 850 different flavor and aroma chemicals interacting during roasting and brewing.

☕ Americans drink more than 300 million cups of coffee every day, 75% home-brewed. Adding the exported coffee products that have been processed in the US adds up to one-fifth of all the world's coffee, making the US the largest buyer of coffee beans in the world.

☕ Americans get more antioxidants from coffee than from any other source. By chemical analysis, a cup of coffee has more antioxidants than a cup of green tea (twice as much or more).

☕ Coffee grows wild only in Ethiopia. The region is the genetic source of all coffee trees.

☕ Two types of coffee trees account for essentially all coffee today: Robusta (30%) and Arabica (70%). Robusta contains more caffeine and tastes very bitter, but it's very hardy, thrives anywhere warm and occasionally wet, produces more beans and it is much cheaper to grow. In contrast, arabica beans have a more pleasant range of flavors, but they only grow well in warm climates above altitudes of about 3000 feet. This limits it's growing region to tropical hills, high valleys, plateaus, and the slopes of mountains or volcanoes.

☕ Coffee beans are, in general, considered to be either "commercial" or "specialty". According to the Specialty Coffee Association of America, each batch or lot of specialty beans must be taste-tested (cupped) according to their guidelines and score at least 80 points on a scale of 50 to 100. Most specialty coffee beans are purchased through US importers for approximately \$1.50 to \$3.50/lb, and they are roasted in small individually controlled batches. Some unusual specialty coffee beans, such as Hawaiian Kona, Jamaican Blue Mountain, or Kopi Luwak, may sell for much higher prices. But just being expensive doesn't necessarily mean they taste better. Judging good or bad flavor is always a question of personal choice.

☕ Commercial green Arabica beans sell for about \$1.20/lb (2007 average) through US ports. Robusta beans sell for only \$0.80/lb average. All coffee prices assume high-quality beans, but discounts may be applied for old beans, for defects that might include damaged beans or debris, or for very large quantity purchases. Commercial coffee is roasted in huge continuous ovens and then sells for \$3.00 to \$6.00/lb under many major brand names in food stores. Vendors of brewed coffee routinely use one pound of roasted beans to make about 50 cups of coffee or shots of espresso. So one pound of coffee may yield \$50.00 to more than \$250.00 in sales.

Coffee Production in 2007

Top 10 countries by quantity:


Country	percent
Brazil	28.83%
Vietnam	13.63%
Colombia	10.60%
Indonesia	5.98%
Ethiopia	4.90%
India	4.14%
Mexico	3.72%
Guatemala	3.42%
Honduras	2.99%
Peru	2.73%


Total world production:
17 billion pounds.



from *COFFEE ARABICA* by M.E. Eaton, printed in
All About Coffee, William H. Ukers, 1935

People Facts...


 Harvesting machines are becoming more widely used in high-production countries with farms on level ground, but most coffee (80%) is still picked by hand. A good picker may gather more than 100 pounds of coffee cherries per day, which produce only about 20 pounds of green coffee beans.

 Farm workers must pick approximately 5 pounds of coffee cherries to get one pound of green beans. For which they would be very lucky to receive 20 cents, or perhaps \$4/day. The normal daily wage is far less. And coffee is usually harvested only two to five months per year. The rest of the year can be a struggle for coffee families who typically have severely limited options for supplemental income to pay for food, medicine and schools.


 Coffee farmers and pickers can be easily isolated from their foreign customers:

- by rough terrain a lack of pack animals or trucks;
- by individuals who may control local transportation, bean pulping and drying equipment, and access to storage warehouses and shipping ports;
- by lack of knowledge about the coffee market, customer preferences, farming techniques to increase the value of their crop, and simple record keeping and accounting skills to know when they are being cheated.


These and other local economic and political barriers can make it impossible for tens of millions of small farmers and pickers to change their poor living conditions. Help is needed to make sustainable improvements for coffee families, for both adult and youth education, health care, clean water, sewage disposal, farm equipment, and a living wage that represents a fair share of the consumer sales for the products they produce.


 Fair trade is a 50-year-old movement only partially coordinated by organizations based in importing countries worldwide. These organizations certify many products such as coffee, tea, chocolate, sugar, and handcrafts and they may also provide a range of support services and other direct aid to coffee families. The partnership includes government aid and trade agencies in many countries as well as the United Nations. The goals and requirements of the organizations are similar, promoting fair wages, decent living conditions, and sustainable

ecology worldwide. One key component of fair trade is a certification mark which should be on every coffee bag, but may or may not show on the final consumer product. No matter how loosely allied, all fair trade organizations trace their roots to efforts such as Ten Thousand Villages and SERRV in the U.S., Oxfam in the U.K., and the later Fair Trade Organisation in the Netherlands.

 Perhaps the primary "Fair Trade" certification is directed by an international group of twenty Fair Trade Labeling Organizations (FLOs). In the U.S., the FLO is [TransFairUSA](#). In part, FLOs require farmers to organize into a specific co-op model, and they guarantee that a minimum price (currently \$1.26/lb) will be paid to the co-op. The combined FLO/IFAT/TransFair organization is a self-supporting market-based system that is funded out of the price of the coffee, by charging each co-op for using the certification logo or the label "Fair Trade". It is hoped that the co-op model may someday provide the same force for improving labor standards that unions provided in the US and other countries during the last century. Since it is market-based, The FLO/IFAT/TransFair system can almost instantly scale up or down with demand to support any level of participation. But Fair Trade by itself can not solve all the problems of unfair trade.



 Charitable (non-market-based) organizations have for many years provided much needed direct help such as schools and teachers, money, food, medicine, doctors and nurses. Working either alone or as an initiator or partner in a fair trade effort, charitable groups and churches provide critical direct support, local management and oversight that may serve all aspects of the problem, being flexible enough to help in any way that's needed. Noteworthy examples of these are [Coffee Kids](#), [Christian Aid \(UK\)](#), [Oxfam](#), [CRS](#), [LWR](#), and [Equal Exchange](#). These are of course funded by (and limited by) donations.

 In addition to the excellent programs above, an interesting market-based movement has been growing, termed *relationship coffee*. Primarily small-medium sized coffee roasting companies in the U.S. and elsewhere have been contacting growers directly, bypassing middlemen and large competitors. They then work directly with small growers to help them increase the value of their crops so they can sell to the expanding specialty coffee market. These improved crops are purchased directly by the roaster and a high market value is paid directly to the grower. Based on the profitability of the relationship, the roaster may also provide direct aid to the local community. The savings in economic efficiency can provide benefits for all parties, making the arrangement sustainable and allows for at least some of the scaling power of the worldwide marketplace. While not yet organized or regulated, this direct model could impact a much larger consumer market, provide higher quality coffee for the same price as commercial coffee on the store shelves, about \$5.00/lb, as well as dramatic benefits for coffee families.

For More Information...

Books

Uncommon Grounds, Mark Pendergrast

An unblinking history of coffee and the modern coffee industry.

Available at public libraries, coffee websites or usual book vendors (Amazon.com)

Coffee Basics, Kevin Knox and Julie Sheldon Huffaker

A brief but very comprehensive overview.

Available at public libraries, coffee websites or usual book vendors (Amazon.com)

Coffee Info

[Coffee Science Information Centre](#): How coffee beans are decaffeinated, coffee history, and more.

[Lucid Cafe - about coffee](#) : Coffee info from Kenneth Davids, editor of Coffee Review magazine.

[International Coffee Organization](#): Coffee market statistics

[Ineedcoffee.com](#): Independent info on coffee and home brewing.

[Homerosters.org](#): Independent forum about home roasting.

[Coffee Review](#): Respected source of coffee info and "The World's Leading Coffee Buying Guide".

[Coffee Research Institute](#): Small, but often quoted source for coffee info and coffee science.

[CoffeeGeek.com](#): Perhaps the largest forum for coffee fanatics and raw coffee info and opinions.

Fair Trade and Charitable Service Organizations

[Co-op America](#): "economic action for a just planet", programs such as Responsible Shopper.

[Oxfam America](#): "creating lasting solutions to global poverty, hunger, and social injustice."

[Equal Exchange](#): On-line source for "100% Fairly Traded" roasted coffee, and good coffee info.

[Coffee Kids](#): "improve the quality of life for children and families in coffee-growing communities around the world" [my favorite charitable service organization]

[Catholic Relief Services - Fair Trade](#): Emergency aid, advocacy and charitable support on many fronts.

[Lutheran World Relief - Fair Trade](#): Emergency aid, advocacy and charitable support on many fronts.

[Christian Aid \(UK\)](#): Advocacy and charitable support on many fronts.

[TransFairUSA.org](#): "Fair Trade" certification for coffee and other products, and a list of retail sources.

[American Radio Works - Humanize the Coffee Trade](#): Opinion paper on coffee economics.

Coffee For Purchase (and coffee info)

[Cooperative Coffees](#): 23-member roaster's co-op for relationship coffee, 100% fair trade.

[Dean's Beans](#): Both green beans and roasted coffee, 100% fair trade and organic.

[Costco](#): Low-cost Fair Trade coffee.

[CounterCultureCoffee](#): High-quality relationship coffee.

[Captain's Coffee](#): Green fair trade coffee.